Free Agency Review by Patricia Traina

As expected, the New York Giants entered free agency determined to add pieces to an offensive unit that last year vastly underperformed.

However, their approach in adding pieces has no doubt left fans wondering why the heck they didn’t bother to address the offensive line, especially with the offensive tackle draft class being one of the worst in years.

We’re going to try our best to make sense of it for you. Once we have completed those explanations, we will give you our usual “Comings, Goings, Staying” analysis.

WHAT’S THE PLAN?

You’re probably wondering—rightfully so—what the Giants’ plan is with the moves made and the moves not made, particularly those on the offensive line.

You’re also probably concerned about the situation at offensive tackle, especially given the struggles of Ereck Flowers and Bobby Hart last year.

The problem is that the Giants went into free agency knowing that big money was going to be thrown around at offensive linemen, and they knew that there was no chance they’d be able to compete, not after seriously draining their resources last year on a defensive unit that desperately needed a lot of Do-Re-Mi to repair a broken unit.

The Giants are instead taking a gamble with their offensive line. First, they’re going to stick with Flowers as one of their starters and we are convinced more than ever that he’ll remain at left tackle.

After the 2017 season, they have to decide on the option year of his rookie deal, and for as much as some would love to see Flowers on the bench, the only way that’s happening is if he gets injured.

Now, will Flowers move to the right side as some have been calling for? We don’t think so; for several reasons, among them the fact that we just do not see the Giants getting a better option to replace him—and yes, that includes a potential draft pick, which, again, we don’t see happening.

Flowers’ technique is the biggest issue—particularly his footwork. If the coaching staff can somehow get that fixed, if Flowers somehow realized that he needs to park his derrière in former NFL offensive lineman LeCharles Bentley’s O-line Performance World, that would be a big step in the right direction.

Flowers and Hart, remember, are still young—both will turn 23 this year. We realize that both are adults, but as is often the case with young adults, rarely is the maturity level there when it comes to just starting out one’s career, especially if it’s a career in the public setting.

Perhaps, in time, both will grow up and realize that the little things really do count, such as getting in that extra lift or staying an extra hour to study film.

We found it rather interesting that in the locker room, Flowers and Hart’s stalls are together and on the opposite side of the room from the rest of the offensive linemen.

In fact, we rarely recall seeing them intermingle with the guys on the other side of the room, though to be fair, during the season, we get about 45 minutes in the locker room per day, and on most days, the entire offensive line group isn’t at their respective lockers.

Anyway, we think of Flowers and Hart, the latter is the bigger concern. That’s where the new tight end/fullback, Rhett Ellison, is going to come in handy. Based on trends last season, the Giants set most of their running plays toward the right side. The added blocking should help them with running to the strong side.

We also think they’re going to remake the running game. Obviously, the process has started—Rashad Jennings, an intelligent veteran but a plodder, is gone.

We don’t see Bobby Rainey returning, and we suspect that Shane Vereen’s role might start to diminish even more (assuming he’s recovered in time after re-tearing his triceps muscle late last season) because we think Paul Perkins has a similar skill set.

What we think is going to happen in the draft is the Giants are going to dip into a loaded running backs class to come up with that smash mouth, and move the chains power back (think Brandon Jacobs). Sure, it helps to have blocking upfront, but it also helps a lot to have a power back with vision who can make something out of nothing, which Jennings rarely did.

Now add to that the big physical receiver that is Brandon Marshall, and we think the Giants’ running game, which had a tremendously negative effect on the overall play calling as well as the production, should improve things, plus allow the Giants to get by with their offensive line (which we do think could see at least one new starter at right guard) for another year.

THE JOHNATHAN HANKINS MYSTERY

If there is one thing that has simply shocked us regarding how free agency has unfolded, continued on page 2
it’s been the lack of a market for defensive tackle Johnathan Hankins.

Actually, we’re not that surprised when we break it down. First, the draft class is loaded with defensive tackles. Second, we heard from a reliable source that Hankins’ opening asking price was “off the charts,” even for teams with salary cap space to burn.

Hankins, remember, had his best year playing more of a nose tackle role. Well, most 4-3 teams usually pull their nose tackle off the field in pass-rushing situations in favor of another speed rusher, so there was never any guarantee Hankins would be an every-down player as he was with the Giants.

The biggest thing factor, as we see it, is that despite being just 25 years old and full of potential, Hankins hasn’t really reached that potential just yet.

Consider this: The Giants added Damon Harrison last year to play the position that Hankins had filled. While the move was a no-brainer, it doesn’t exactly bode well for Hankins that the Giants felt the need to go outside of the organization rather than hope he had developed in that role.

With Harrison on board, that pushed Hankins to the 3-technique spot. To be blunt, he was too heavy for the role, and therefore ineffective.

So where does that leave Hankins and the Giants, as of press time? We wouldn’t be shocked if the Giants re-sign Hankins to a very affordable two-year contract, with the second year being a club option. We think if we’re Hankins, we request that he shed some of his weight so he can move better and maybe fit into that 3-technique role.

We also would look to draft a defensive tackle just in case Hankins can’t recapture what he did in 2014. One guy we like, but whom we doubt will be an option only if we’re Hankins, remember, had his best year playing more of a nose tackle role. Well, most 4-3 teams usually pull their nose tackle off the field in pass-rushing situations in favor of another speed rusher, so there was never any guarantee Hankins would be an every-down player as he was with the Giants.

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We also would look to draft a defensive tackle just in case Hankins can’t recapture what he did in 2014. One guy we like, but whom we doubt will be an option only because we suspect he’ll be off the board before the Giants get a crack at him, is Florida’s Caleb Brantley, at 6-4, 307 pounds.

Again, we’ll get more into the draft prospects next month, but what we like about Brantley is how disruptive he has been (31 tackles with 9.5 for a loss, 2.5 sacks and one forced fumble in 2016), given his explosion and burst.

If the Giants add a defensive tackle prospect and structure a Hankins deal to include a team option in the second year, then the two sides can part amicably, with the Giants having used the second year to ease the sting of the cap hit created by the signing bonus.

TERMINOLOGY DEFINED

Likely to be Earned (LTBE) incentive: An LTBE automatically counts against the salary cap for the season the incentive is tied to. If the LTBE isn’t achieved, the club receives a cap credit applied to the following season.

Not Likely to be Earned (NLTBE) incentive: An NLTBE does not count immediately against the salary cap in the current cap year. If the player achieves an NLTBE incentive, the amount is deducted from the following season’s cap space.

Right of First Refusal (ROFR): The lowest possible restricted free agent (RFA) tender level. This level gives the team the right to match any offer sheets, and offers draft pick compensation equivalent to the same round in which the player was originally drafted. If the player was undrafted and he signs an offer sheet that the Giants don’t match, they receive no draft pick compensation for the loss.

Minimum Salary Benefit: Qualifying contracts that meet specific criteria (on that in a moment) brings the paragraph 5 (base salary) cap charge of a vested veteran with a minimum of four or more accrued seasons down to the equivalent of a player with two accrued seasons.

In addition to accrued seasons, a player’s contract must be for one year for the minimum salary commensurate with his experience. In addition, additional compensation such as roster and signing bonuses may not exceed $80,000.

Right now, we’d say we’re underwhelmed by the thought of either Jay Bromley or Robert Thomas as a starting defensive tackle for this team. Both are solid rotational guys, but we’re not sure either is ready to take on full workload.


Who’s Coming

WR BRANDON MARSHALL

(Released by NY Jets): 2 years, $11 million, $2 million signing bonus, $5 million guaranteed

Base Salaries: $3M (2017; fully guaranteed), $5M (2018)

$500K per year in LTBE incentives based on play time

$500K per year in NLTBE incentives based on performance metrics (receptions/receiving yards)

2017 Cap Hit: $4.5 million

The Giants are taking what basically amounts to a one-year rental on veteran receiver Brandon Marshall, released by the Jets at the start of the month.

And why not? Marshall, 32 years old, is just the kind of missing firepower the Giants need in their offense to get a passing game that fell from seventh (271.4 yards/game) in 2015 to 17th (242.4 yards/game) last year, back on track.

There are two potential areas in which Marshall is going to be a big (no pun intended) help to the Giants’ offensive line.

The first, obviously, is in downfield blocking. We shudder at how many times we remember the Giants’ outside receivers throwing a half-hearted downfield block—it was almost as though they didn’t want to be bothered doing the dirty work.

But not Marshall. At 6-4, this is a receiver who is going to tower over most of the defensive backs he’ll come up against. This receiver, while not the fastest of the lot, is one of the strongest and most physical this team has had in quite some time.

Another area in which a healthy Marshall stands to deliver the goods is in the red zone, an area where the Giants struggled profusely last year, especially in the passing game.

How bad was it? In 2016, Eli Manning attempted 67 red-zone passes, completing just 36 of those for a dismal 53.7 percent.

Of those completions, 17 went for touchdowns and three were picked off. Based on quarterbacks who attempted at least 50 red-zone pass attempts, Manning ranked 11th (out of 27) in the league, behind other quarterbacks such as Sam Bradford of Minnesota, Joe Flacco of Baltimore and Blake Bortles of Jacksonville.

Inside the 10-yard line, things were even worse. Manning attempted 26 passes, completing 12 (46.15 percent). Of those, 10 went for touchdowns and one went for an interception. His ranking? Eighteenth out of 27 quarterbacks.

Getting back to Marshall and the red zone, he was targeted 21 times in the red zone last season (same as Odell Beckham Jr.). Marshall caught seven of those targets

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(versus Beckham’s nine) for four touchdowns (to Beckham’s five).

Inside the 10-yard line, Marshall caught three of seven pass targets for two touchdowns (Beckham caught four of nine targets for four touchdowns).

The point here is that Marshall, who by the way last year played injured, was just as effective as Beckham inside of the red zone as a scoring threat.

If you don’t think for a moment that Marshall’s size doesn’t have head coach and play caller Ben McAdoo drooling over the possibilities, then we don’t know what to tell you further.

Simply put, this is a steal of a signing by the Giants, whom Marshall picked, despite their offering him the least amount of money because he believes the Giants to be the closest among the teams that courted him into winning a championship.

In an interview with Good Morning Football on the NFL Network the day after he signed his Giants contract, Marshall said he liked the stability the Giants organization provided.

“I felt like I needed stability at the top. I thought that last year they handled their rough times extremely well, so you see Jerry Reese is still there, and Coach McAdoo is a strong head coach, a strong leader, and obviously, the quarterback play. I thought that if I was going to be able to go out a winner, I definitely needed a quarterback,” he said.

“It was extremely important for me to go to a place where I didn’t want to be a number one. I wanted a dominant number one. And Odell is the biggest superstar in our business. Obviously, we have a great defense, so it’ll be awesome to see those guys grow [during] year two, all together.”

Just as it will be awesome to see what Marshall brings to the passing game.

TE/FB RHETT ELLISON
(from Minnesota): 4 years, $18 million, $8 million guaranteed
Base salaries: $975K (2017; fully guaranteed); $2.475M (2018; $2.025M guaranteed); $4.475M (2019); $4.975M (2020)
Workout bonus: $25K per year
Cap Hit: $2.25 million

The very first question head coach Ben McAdoo was asked at the NFL scouting combine was about the use of a traditional fullback in the offense, and if the Giants would return to using that type of player or continue to try to stay with a hybrid fullback/tight end.

“Well it just really depends how things shake out—whether it’s the free agent market, whether it’s the draft class, it depends on what you have to choose from, the guys on your roster,” McAdoo responded “We’ll continue to evaluate. If we feel there’s someone out there that can help us, we’ll use him.”

The team has since declined to tender Nikita Whitlock, who was to have been an Exclusive Rights Free Agent (ERA), and they have released Will Johnson, a tight end/fullback hybrid signed last year.

Both players spent 2016 on injured reserve, and what many fans don’t realize, is that when the Giants lost both of those players, they had to toss out a large chunk of their playbook that was designed to support a potential power running game.

The Giants have since addressed this problem with the addition of 28-year-old Rhett Ellison, a tight end/fullback hybrid who comes over via free agency from the Vikings. The 6-5, 250-pound Ellison played his college ball at USC, where he was teammates with current Giants strong-side linebacker Devon Kennard.

Ellison has an interesting back story. He is son of Riki Ellison, the New Zealand-born former NFL linebacker with the 49ers and three-time Super Bowl champion.

Rhett is also the grandnephew of the first captain of the All Blacks rugby team that plays in New Zealand, Thomas Ellison and is related to Jacob Ellison and Tamati Ellison, both of whom are rugby players in New Zealand.

Football-wise, Ellison was drafted in the fourth round by the Vikings in 2012. He’s played in two complete seasons, those being in 2012 as a rookie and in 2014, and was mainly used as a receiver out of the backfield, recording 51 receptions for 515 yards and three touchdowns in 73 games. Ellison’s single NFL rushing attempt was a one-yard rushing touchdown.

OL D.J. FLUKER
(cut by the Chargers): 1 year, $3 million
$1.4 million roster bonus (guaranteed)
Base Salary: $1.5 million
Workout Bonus: $100K
Cap Hit: $3M

The Giants are taking on another problem with the addition of 3-year-old OL D.J. Fluker. It’s believed, is going to step in the Giants’ scheme to provide a stable and guiding hand.

When Pugh dealt with his knee injury that cost him several games, that is, in fact, when the opposing competition with Pugh was next to him to provide a stable and guiding hand.

Can Fluker flourish in the Giants’ scheme? We would hope the fresh start he’s getting allows him to reset himself and attack the forthcoming competition with gusto. But we’d be less than honest if we said we didn’t have some reservations.

Before we move on, we received quite a few questions about what the Giants’ plans are for the offensive line. We believe that Weston Richburg and Justin Pugh are locks at center and left guard respectively (and no, we do not see Pugh moving to left tackle).

We also are coming to the conclusion that Ereck Flowers is going to remain at left tackle. We know that won’t sit well with Giants fans who feel otherwise, but in looking at the situation objectively, there are a couple of factors that come into play here.

First, as we have said before, the Giants need to make a decision on whether to pick up Flowers’ option year after the 2017 season. The idea of moving him to the right side, while not outlandish for reasons we’ll explain in a moment, does have some drawbacks.

The first is that Flowers would have to relearn all new landmarks from the right side, a challenge that, while not impossible, is going to take a lot of work.

The biggest reason, however, that we believe Flowers will stay at left tackle is because of Pugh. When we go back and look at Flowers’ performance last year, we find that he had some of his best games when Pugh was next to him to provide a stable and guiding hand.

When Pugh dealt with his knee injury that cost him several games, that is, in fact, when the wheels really fell off the “Flowers wagon.”

Now, let’s assume the Giants do move Flowers to right tackle. They are potentially putting him next to a new voice, even if it’s John Jerry at right guard. So not only does Flowers have to get used to hitting new landmarks on the right side, he also has to establish a comfort level with his right guard.

Okay, so why not move Flowers inside to guard? Again, there is the matter of learning new landmarks and adjusting his

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footwork, which is inconsistent to begin with.

So, no, it’s not going not be pretty if this happens, but we think that, barring an unexpected turn of events in which a Sean Locklear-type shakes free and can be had for peanuts, Flowers is going to be the left tackle in 2017, for better or for worse.

Now, what about the flip side and why it wouldn’t be an outlandish idea to move Flowers to right tackle? From a coaching perspective, the Giants can point to Riddell Ellison, whom we think will see most of his snaps on that right side.

Ellison could potentially help whoever is at right tackle, but with that said, we think that’s short-sighted planning by the coaches, because defenses move their pass rushers around to get idea matchups and we believe that the least of the evils is to leave Flowers at left tackle and hope that in Year 3, he finally “gets it.”

QB GENO SMITH
(via the Jets): 1 year, $2 million

Roster Bonus: $200K (paid 3/22/17).
Base Salary: $775K ($100K guaranteed)
Workout bonus: $25K.
NLTBE: $200K ($12.5K/game if on 46-man roster); up to $800K in various undisclosed playing time incentives.
Cap Hit: $1.087M

Just as is the case with the draft, the Giants are usually good at springing a surprise that no one saw coming, not even the most astute followers who can apply logic to moves that may or may not be made.

Well, the signing for former Jets quarterback Geno Smith is one such move that has us perplexed for numerous reasons.

First, Smith is coming off an ACL injury suffered on October 25, 2016. At the time of his signing, he’s not even six months removed from surgery; even before that, he had put up some inconsistent film.

And let’s not forget his rather strange NFL odyssey, which has included missing a team meeting because he had a “brain fart” regarding a time change, or his fight with a former teammate leading to Smith absorbing a sucker’s punch, which resulted in a broken jaw.

So why Geno Smith?

In his first two years, Smith played in a West Coast system under former offensive coordinator Brian Schottenheimer. In that system, very like what the Giants currently run, Smith completed 466 passes out of 810 attempts (57.5 percent) for 5,571 yards, 25 touchdowns and 34 interceptions.

No, those aren’t terribly impressive numbers, but if you look at the last five games he started (those coming in 2014), that seems to be where Smith started to turn the corner.

In those games, he threw for 1,096 yards, completing 70.1 percent of his pass attempts. He also threw seven touchdowns to two interceptions and, for good measure, had 19 rushes for 83 yards.

We suspect—and we might be wrong, of course—that is what drew the Giants to Smith. To be fair, the Jets’ coaching situation has been far from stable.

Perhaps the Giants’ decision makers feel that Smith has enough talent to be a fit in their system and that with a more stable environment around him, he might finally reach his potential.

For that to happen, Eli Manning would have to be injured for Smith to get on the field during a regular-season game.

With all that said, Smith’s time to shine is going to be this summer, where he’ll get plenty of opportunity to put things on tape for the rest of the league.

If the 26-year-old plays well, then, of course, there is always the chance he gets a longer contract from the Giants, but we don’t think that will be the case—not if Smith aspires to be a starting quarterback somewhere and not with the 2018 quarterback class shaping up to be a lot better than this year’s pending crop of rookies.

RB SHAUN DRAUGHN
(via the 49ers): 1 year, Financial terms N/A

We will update the contract information on the electronic edition of the newsletter that appears on the website. If you do not have internet access and want any contract information that we didn’t have as of press time, please send a self-addressed stamped No. 10 envelope with first-class postage affixed to PO Box 6434, Edison, NJ 08818-6434.

The Giants swapped out Bobby Rainey, an unrestricted free agent (UFA) who’s not expected back, for journeyman Shaun Draughn, 5-11, 205 pounds.

The 29-year-old Draughn is a journeyman who started his NFL career with Kansas City in 2011. After two years, he moved to the Ravens for the 2013 season and then over the course of the 2014 season, he was with Chicago, San Diego and Cleveland.

Draughn, who has 723 yards on 225 carries and seven touchdowns, spent the last two seasons with San Francisco, for whom he started seven games.

He also has 80 career receptions for 597 yards and two touchdowns.

Last year, he scored six touchdowns, four on the ground and two via pass. By comparison, the Giants’ running backs rushed for six touchdowns as a group, and added one via reception (Rashad Jennings).

The addition of Draughn doesn’t mean the Giants are finished adding to the league’s 29th-ranked rushing offense last season.

We would not at all be surprised to see the Giants add a power running back somewhere in the third to fifth round of next month’s draft.

CB VALENTINO BLAKE
(from Tennessee)
1 year, $855K (Minimum Salary Benefit)
Base Salary: $775K
Roster Bonus (paid 3/22): $20K
Workout Bonus: $20K
Roster Bonus: $40K (if on 53-man roster for any one game)
Cap Hit: $695K

With the Giants losing Coty Sensabaugh to the Steelers, the football player formerly known as Antwon Blake—he changed his first name to Valentino, his middle name, last year after signing with the Titans—steps in to take Sensabaugh’s role in the cornerback rotation.

Blake initially entered the NFL as an undrafted free agent (UDFA) with Jacksonville, with whom he spent one season in 2012. He moved to the Steelers the following year, playing there for three seasons.

Blake, 5-9, 198, has appeared in 78 NFL games with 18 starts. He has 183 tackles (154 solo) and one sack, with 23 passes defended, and three interceptions, including one for a touchdown.

His 2015 season wasn’t very solid, not at least according to Ryan Smith of Pro Football Focus, who, in response to the Giants’ announcement sent via Twitter, responded to inform Big Blue fans that in 2015, Blake allowed 78 receptions for 1,101 yards and eight touchdowns en route to a 108.1 NFL Rating (the lower the better, when it comes to defenders).

What about his run defense? Smith reported that Blake, whose nickname is “Zilla” (as in Godzilla, because he believes himself to play bigger than his size) missed 28 tackles.

Yikes!

WHO’S GOING

WR VICTOR CRUZ
2017 Cap Figure: $9.4 million
Dead Money: $1.9 million
Cap Savings: $7.5 million

Cruz was a salary cap casualty last month, a bittersweet transaction that unfortunately had to be made.

Cruz began to lose snaps to youngsters

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Roger Lewis Jr. and Tavarres King after the bye week. While we had seen a couple of opinions speculating that the Giants might try to lower Cruz’s $9.4 million cap figure (which included a $1 million roster bonus due five days after the start of the new league year), that was never going to happen.

There were two reasons for this. First was Cruz’s non-participation on special teams. Even if you make the argument that Cruz could be a nice fourth receiver option, that wasn’t going to happen to just, because he wasn’t a special teams participant, but more so because the transition to outside receiver just didn’t appear to go as smoothly as everyone might have hoped would be the case.

The other reason? Head coach Ben McAdoo’s willingness to try his young players out and develop them, even via game snaps.

We sometimes marvel when we receive suggestions that the Giants pursue an older, more established veteran in free agency, despite said veteran’s position being rich in the draft.

From a roster building perspective, it makes zero sense to invest in a veteran (unless that veteran is young enough to give you several quality seasons) when you can potentially get the same—if not better—upside from a younger player.

We will say this much about Cruz. We admire his resolve—we always have—in fighting back from the injuries that threatened to derail his career.

While we admit that at times we wondered of Cruz would last as long as he did, especially given his issues with dropped balls, he’s been a fine representative of the Giants’ organization.

**RB RASHAD JENNINGS**

2017 Cap Figure: $3.062 million
Dead Money: $562,500
Cap Savings: $2.499 million

When it came to solid locker room citizens, there was none better than Rashad Jennings, whose work ethic was second to none.

Being a good locker room citizen doesn’t necessarily translate over to production. Since signing with the team in 2014, Jennings made it through a full season just once, in 2015, when the Giants went to the famous four-man rotation.

In his 40 games played, Jennings—who was supposed to be a bell cow for the running game—recorded just three 100-yard rushing performances and rushed for 80-99 yards just four times.

The problem, as we noted it he past, is he brought plodding feet and a lack of vision to the field, resulting in a lot of yards being left on the field.

By the end of the 2016 season, Jennings, who has always been rather reliable as a pass blocker, lost touches to rookie Paul Perkins.

The Giants, meanwhile, appear to be looking at getting younger at the running back spot, putting fresher legs behind an offensive line that will be getting a makeover of its own.

**LB UANI UNGA**

2017 Cap Figure: $615,000
Dead Money: N/A
Cap Savings: $615,000

For one summer, at least, it looked like Uani ‘Unga was the next undrafted free agent discovered by the Giants.

‘Unga had an impressive showing in the team’s 2015 training camp, when he stepped in for Jon Beason while the veteran was nursing a sprained knee.

‘Unga, who started three games, soon showed that the hype generated in the preseason was just that—hype.

While he played a solid downhill game against the run, he was repeated exposed in coverage so badly that the Giants reduced his defensive snaps in the second half of the 2015 season in favor of veteran Jasper Brinkley.

‘Unga, who also dealt with a neck issue in 2015, found himself on season-ending injured reserve last May with an undisclosed injury.

With the Giants having drafted B.J. Goodson to potentially be their future starting inside linebacker, it comes as no surprise that the Giants are moving on from the former BYU defender.

**TE/FB WILL JOHNSON**

2017 Cap Figure: $1.275 million
Dead Money: $200,000
Cap Savings: $1.075 million

When the Giants signed Will Johnson last year, they had grand visions of him being a huge asset to the running game. Indeed, we saw potential flashes of that during the OTAs and right through training camp until a burner ended Johnson’s 2016 season.

For those who don’t remember, Johnson’s burner was significant enough to the point where it was affecting the strength in one arm.

Although he received vigilant medical care and rehab, the injury was one that the doctors simply weren’t able to put a timetable on regarding a return, hence the decision to place him on injured reserve.

When they lost Johnson in addition to Nikita Whitlock, the other true fullback on the team, they also lost a big part of their playbook, particularly in the running game.

Head coach Ben McAdoo had hoped to have a versatile fullback/tight end hybrid there who could come out of the backfield as a potential receiver and who could also lineup as a blocker.

Well, the Giants have that now in Rhett Ellison, whom we discussed earlier in this issue. As for Johnson, there is a chance—a very narrow one at that—he’s back on a one-year minimum deal after the draft, as the Giants left the door ajar for him.

Honestly, though, we would be surprised if he returns. the Giants have shown that they don’t mess around when it comes to players who suffer neck injuries—see David Wilson and Jameel McClain, both of whom had their respective careers end after suffering neck injuries.

We also don’t really see the point in bringing back Johnson if his skill set is identical to Ellison’s (unless Ellison ends up injured).

What we think will happen moving forward is that the Giants will look to draft a pass receiving tight end to battle it out with Will Tye, and let Ellison and Jerell Adams go at it for the blocking duties, with Matt LaCosse serving as a fallback plan in the event of injury.

Ultimately, we would not be shocked if the Giants keep four tight ends, which, in reality, would be two hybrids and two true tight ends.

We’re just sorry that Johnson, a legitimately genuine guy who was brimming with potential, probably won’t have a chance to be one of them.

**K ROBBIE GOULD**

(UFA) to San Francisco
2 years, $4 million, $1 million guaranteed
Signing bonus: $500,000
Base salaries: $1.5 million (2017; $500K guaranteed), $2 million (2018)

Although Robbie Gould was reliable when it came to place-kicking—he made all his field goal attempts and missed just three of his PATs—where he came up short (no pun intended) was on kickoffs.

Gould’s kickoffs averaged 65.8 yards, putting him near the bottom of kickers last year. Of his kickoffs, more than half were returned, while he managed to boot only 19 into the end zone for touchbacks.

The security in knowing that Gould could make field goals and PATs is nice, but moving forward, the Giants hope to be less reliant on their kicker to convert field goals—especially inside the red zone.

Kickoffs, on the other hand, are a bigger
WHO'S STAYING?

DE JASON PIERRE-PAUL
4 years, $62M total, $20M signing bonus; guaranteed: $40M

Roster Bonus: $1M per year

Workout Bonus: $250K per year
Notes: Pierre-Paul can earn an additional $4M over the life of the contract if he reaches certain incentives in the final two years of the deal.

It took a little longer than anticipated, but the Giants and defensive end Jason Pierre-Paul have a new multiyear plan in place that works out to an average of $13.5 million per year.

Regardless of what you might think about Pierre-Paul’s production—we’ve had several people try to argue that he isn’t worth the “big money” because most of his sacks come against subpar competition—Pierre-Paul’s contribution and importance to the defensive line is vastly underrated.

First, when Pierre-Paul ended up missing the final four games of the regular season and the playoff game, that clearly had a ripple effect on Olivier Vernon, who became the recipient of double and triple teams much like former Giants defensive end Michael Strahan used to see. Vernon and Pierre-Paul complement each other in this regard as they present a “pick-your-poison” dilemma for opposing teams to solve.

But sacks aside and putting aside that Pierre-Paul has only played in a full season once in the last four years, where he makes his money is against the run. People might find sacks to be the sexiest of the stats for a defensive end, but if a team isn’t stopping the run, it’s not going to have much of an opportunity to rack up the sacks.

Against the run, Pierre-Paul posted 39 tackles, 24 solo while missing just two tackles. Unlike some defensive ends who excel either at the point of attack or in pursuit, Pierre-Paul got the job done in both areas against the run.

He was a big reason that the Giants defense can be damaging.

But as far as chemistry goes, retaining Pierre-Paul is so important, as he is a key cog in Steve Spagnuolo’s master plan. If he can shed the injury label that he’s attracted lately, then even better.

QB JOSH JOHNSON
2 years, $1.95M
Roster Bonus: $100K (paid on March 22)
2017 Cap Hit: $1.015M

We weren’t shocked to see Josh Johnson re-signed ahead of the disappointing Ryan Nassib. By year’s end, Johnson had, of course replaced Nassib as Eli Manning’s primary backup.

Even before Nassib started dealing with an elbow issue, we had heard whispers that the coaching staff liked Johnson’s skillset a bit better for the offense they were trying to run. (Nassib, remember, was drafted in 2013, the final year of Kevin Gilbride’s offense.)

Now, with all that said, let’s put this move into perspective. This year’s quarterback class isn’t overflowing with can’t-miss prospects. In fact, you might be hard pressed to say there is any single one slam dunk among the group.

However, as we discussed in the Geno Smith entry, the Giants aren’t hard-pressed just yet to find Manning’s successor, not if they truly believe Manning can give them a high enough level of competition in the remaining years of his contract.

Barring a rash of injuries at other positions that warrant otherwise, we see the Giants keeping three quarterbacks on the 53-man roster: Manning, Johnson and Smith.

Both Johnson and Smith, as we have noted, have experience, the quality of which is up for debate, but hopefully is a topic that will never have to be discussed.

RB ORLEANS DARKWA
1 Year, $805K total
Base Salary: $695K
Signing Bonus: $200K
Roster Bonus: $200K
Workout Bonus: $10K
Cap Hit: $1.037M

The Giants opted to not tender Darkwa as an RFA, as doing so would have meant tendering him $1.797 million, which is far too high. The Giants re-signed Darkwa to a one-year deal as they set the stage for field position, something the Giants didn’t always win last year.

G/T MARSHALL NEWHOUSE
(UFA) to Oakland
2 years, $3.5 million, $500K guaranteed
$500K Roster Bonus (5th day of 2017 LY)
Base salaries: $1.05 million (2017), $1.55 million (2018)
Roster Bonus: up to $500K per year for being on the active roster.

Fans might have rightfully been frustrated by Marshall Newhouse’s play in the two years in which he was with the team, but with Newhouse, the coaching staff always knew what they were getting: A true pro who was meticulous in his preparation, even if the skill set didn’t scream “starter.”

And that’s what Giants fans have to remember here. Newhouse wasn’t initially signed to be a starting offensive lineman, but rather, his purpose was to be a swing tackle who could, in a pinch, step in at guard.

He was also a guy who, thanks to his time in Green Bay, didn’t have to start from scratch to learn the offense Ben McAdoo installed when he came to the Giants.

So why, then, didn’t the tackle-starved Giants re-sign Newhouse? Although they didn’t have the money to dip into the deep end of the veteran offensive tackle pool, the intent was to try to upgrade the depth at that position.

That’s what they hope to have accomplished with the addition of D.J. Fluker and the potential addition of a rookie to come from this year’s draft class, be it an actual pick or UDFA.

CB COTY SENSABAUGH
(UFA) to Pittsburgh
2 years, $2.6 million, $425K guaranteed
Base salaries: $775K (2017), $1.4 million (2018)
Signing Bonus: $425K
This player began the 2016 season with the Los Angeles Rams, joining the Giants midway through the 2016 season after his release.

Sensabaugh, who provided depth at cornerback when the Giants experienced injuries to Dominique Rodgers-Cromartie and Eli Apple, appeared in 10 games for the Giants with no starts. He finished with 15 tackles (12 solo), also contributing on special teams.

Who’s Staying?
didn’t get many opportunities to step in—this, of course, all taking place before he ended up on injured reserve.

As we noted in our January issue, we don’t think Darkwa is a starter; we think he flashes on occasion, but doesn’t really make people miss, and thus takes a beating.

Where Darkwa has earned his keep is on special teams. However, with each new draft class that comes in, the challenge becomes even more difficult.

**LS ZAK DEOSSIE**

2 years, $2.415 million, $400K guaranteed

$400K guaranteed, including a $300K roster bonus

Base Salaries: $1M ($100K guaranteed, 2017); $1.015M (2018)

2017 Cap Hit: $1.35M

Next to quarterback Eli Manning, DeOssie is the second-longest tenured member of the Giants and the only one remaining from the 2007 draft class. One gets the impression that DeOssie, a fourth-round draft pick in 2007, and Manning, will both retire together from the Giants at this point.

And why not? Despite some late-career injuries, such as a back ailment and a wrist injury that required surgery, DeOssie has been Mr. Consistent, not only in terms of his snaps, which are, for the most part, stress-free, but also for his ability to hustle down the field and be among the first in on a tackle.

Throughout his Giants career, DeOssie has logged 70 special teams tackles (64 solo). While he hasn’t recorded double-digit tackles since his first two years of his career, DeOssie has finished in the Top 5 on the team in special teams tackles five times over his career, including last season, when he tied with Dwayne Harris for the team lead with seven solo tackles.

**G/T JOHN JERRY**

3 years, $10 million, $2.4 million signing bonus, $4.25 million guaranteed

Signing Bonus: $2.4 million

Base salaries: $925K (2017, fully guaranteed); $3.05 million (2018, fully guaranteed for injury only), $3.05 million (2019, if on the roster 3rd day of the league year)

Roster Bonus: $15,625K per game (up to $250K) if on 46-man gameday roster in 2018 and 2019.

Workout bonus: $25K per year 2017 Cap Hit: $1.75 million

We weren’t surprised at all to see John Jerry re-signed—we actually expected it, knowing that the draft class wasn’t a strong one and the free agent class would be an expensive one.

What we were surprised about was the structure of Jerry’s deal. Usually, if a team dished out guaranteed money, it’s a good sign they might be expecting that player to start.

With Jerry, that could very well be the case. Whereas initial reports had D.J. Fluker penciled in as the starting right guard, we have our doubts.

First, Fluker as a guard struggled more than Fluker as a tackle. And, quite frankly, in the competition for the right side of that line—Brett Jones, Jerry, Fluker and Bobby Hart—we would say at this point that Jerry, a solid pass blocker who showed some improvement as a run blocker, and Fluker, would be the two leading candidates at guard and tackle, respectively.

We noted before that the addition of Rhett Ellison is going to with any luck make a significant difference in the running game. If we’re the Giants and we’re plotting things out, we’d probably say to ourselves that we can live with Jerry for at least another year (unless, of course, someone else “wows” us in the spring and summer).

We hope that a young prospect—we do think the Giants will bring in a young guard prospect (San Diego State’s Nico Siragusa was a name we heard linked to the Giants during the combine)—is ready to go.

Anyway, there’s one other reason that we think Jerry might be a favorite to play guard. Fluker, remember, is coming off some subpar years for which he’s yet to live up to his pedigree. Hart, meanwhile, is still very young.

We can’t imagine that the Giants would put two relatively inexperienced guys on that right side, which is why we wouldn’t be stunned if Jerry earns one of the starting jobs early in the process.

**LB KEENAN ROBINSON**

1 year, $4M breakdown N/A at press time) Robinson joined the Giants last offseason on a one-year deal after spending four seasons with Washington, for whom he was a fourth-round draft choice from the University of Texas in 2012.

One of those seasons was lost to injury.

A key component in pass coverage, Robinson played in his first 16-game season of his career, finished fourth on the team with 79 tackles (52 solo), and he had seven passes defensed.

He also had four special teams tackles (two solo). Robinson had six tackles (four solo) and knocked down a pass in the Giants’ postseason game in Green Bay.

Robinson’s return was put on hold while the Giants resolved the franchise tag with defensive end Jason Pierre-Paul. In doing so, the team was able to free up the space necessary to sign Robinson, who now looks forward to some unfinished business with the Giants.

“We definitely have some unfinished business, especially after leaving with that sour taste from Green Bay,” he said via a teamissued statement. “I think we can achieve much greater heights than we did last year. I think getting right back in the building is one key to doing that.”

**LB MARK HERZLICH**

1 year, $855K (Minimum Salary Benefit)

Signing Bonus: $80K

Base Salary: $775K

Cap Hit: $895K

We really shouldn’t be surprised that the Giants re-signed Mark Herzlich to yet another contract, even with the return of Keenan Robinson.

Right now the Giants need bodies at linebacker, at least until the draft rolls around and they have some additional options.

When we look at signings, we look at length and structure of the contracts, as we think that tells quite a bit regarding how the Giants might be leaning toward the draft.

In the case of the linebackers, the Giants are now in a situation where come 2018, Devon Kennard, Herzlich, Robinson and Jonathan Casillas will all be UFAs. Not to get too far ahead of things, but it’s probably safe to say the team won’t bring back any of them.

We do think the Giants will try to add a linebacker in the draft, perhaps as a potential replacement for Casillas. If they do, that rookie will probably get his feet wet playing special teams.

As for Herzlich, signed as a rookie free agent out of Boston College in 2011, and last year recorded seven tackles and a fumble recovery on special teams in 14 games, his return is to ensure the Giants have a foundation in place on the all-important special teams unit.

However, that doesn’t mean that Herzlich is a lock to be on the 53-man team.

We find it interesting that the Giants this year gave him a Minimum Salary Benefit contract, a rather telling sign that would suggest that they are finally looking to upgrade, but in the event they aren’t able to do so in the coming draft, they have insurance.

**PR/KR/WR DWAYNE HARRIS**

2017 Paycut

Despite making the Pro Bowl for the first time in his career last year, return specialist Dwayne Harris was the first of the Giants players still under contract to be targeted for a restructuring to his 2017 cap figure.

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When he’s been on the field, we’ve liked what we have seen of him as a potential receiver, but his health history, combined with the likely expectation that the Giants will draft a tight end last year, don’t make him a lock for a roster spot this year, unfortunately.

DT Robert Thomas - ERFA (signed, $540K/1 yr): Thomas was a late addition to the 53-man roster last year, a player acquired off waivers via Carolina.

An ideal fit for the 3-technique role in the Giants’ defense, Thomas lost the first few weeks of the season due to an undisclosed ailment that set his development back.

However, the Giants liked enough of what they saw from him to bring him back to compete for a spot in the defensive interior rotation with Jay Bromley.

TE Will Tye - ERFA (signed, $615K/1 yr): Tye has twice seen more than his fair share of snaps as a starter, but like the rest of the Giants tight ends over the last two seasons, he hasn’t done much with them.

He’ll get a chance to compete for a roster spot, which isn’t a lock, with a to-be-determined draft pick—that pick being a guy who is more of a receiving tight end.

It’s possible the Giants might keep four tight ends on the roster, given how vital the position plays in McAdoo’s version of the offense, so Tye isn’t necessarily hanging by a thread.

However, if he’s to stick around, one of the areas in which he’s really going to need to show improvement is in his route running, an area in which he’s really going to need to show improvement is in his route running, and he has to do it if he wants to remain in the league.

DE Kerry Wynn - RFA (tendered, $1.797M, ROFR): The decision to tender Wynn comes as little surprise.

Wynn brings experience to the mix, particularly as a run stopper. In fact, when we look back at last year, we were surprised that Romeo Okwara got the start ahead of Wynn when Pierre-Paul had to miss time with his sports hernia injury. Okwara had that one good game, but wasn’t really able to build on it.

Given that Wynn has an inkling on how to stop the run, we would have preferred to see him as the first- and second-down defensive end and then Okwara or Owa Odighizuwa as the pass rusher in that spot.

Speaking of Odighizuwa, it needs to be remembered that last season was his rookie year (technically, his second season, but he lost his rookie year due to injuries).

We were disappointed that he didn’t quite develop into the two-way threat who could play inside and outside; ultimately, the coaching staff moved him back outside, but even then, we thought Odighizuwa played a bit too stiff at times for our liking.

The bottom line: We would be stunned if the Giants don’t add another defensive end via the draft.

Wynn isn’t a long-term answer; we’re not sure right now that Odighizuwa and Okwara are either, and who knows if Jason Pierre-Paul and the Giants will live happily ever after on a multiyear deal at this point?

NOT TENDERED

The Giants did not tender two Exclusive Rights free agents, receiver Ben Edwards and fullback Nikita Whitlock. Both are now unrestricted free agents.